Management training...
then and now

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The passage of time has greatly dimmed recollections of management studies undertaken in my Diploma of librarianship. If I do recollect any detail, it is of information giving lectures and production of written assignments analysing theories.

Many of my fellow students had backgrounds similar to my own: straight from school to a Bachelors degree to post graduate studies. Our work experience, and indeed life experience, was limited. We lacked a framework in which to apply the theories we studied.

The identification and development of skills which might have enabled us to translate these theories into effective work practices does not feature in my memories. Of course, one explanation of this situation may well be that the research in management had not identified the importance of skills such as communication, team building, goal setting, conflict resolution, interpersonal skills, flexibility and so on that we recognise today as fundamental to good management. The emphasis in the early 1970s seemed to be on analytical and quantitative skills.

Since the early 1970s much has changed in management education in Australian library schools, in content of courses and in theory and practice of curriculum design and development. As well, the growing awareness of the importance of effective management practices in achieving organisational success has made employers look to engage entry-level staff with awareness of management skills and the potential to develop these skills.

My work experience has been in that time of heightened focus on management practices. I give a very simple example. As a new graduate, I do not recollect participation in regular staff meetings: today most workplaces hold regular staff meetings where all staff are encouraged and indeed expected to participate in the evaluation and development of work practices and work unit goals.

My development as a manager in this period of change has been supported in a variety of ways. Firstly, interaction in the workplace with peers and supervisors who practised and supported the attributes of effective managers has provided example on which to model my own behaviour. This has been enhanced by my membership of ALIA whereby I have had opportunities to attend conferences, continuing education activities and to participate in branch and now national committees. These activities have enabled me to share experiences with information sector workers from a huge variety of workplaces. This expanded frame of reference has been invaluable in helping me develop a wider and more strategic approach to problem solving.

My employers have supported my attendance at many continuing education activities, including inhouse skills development activities and programs offered by organisations such as ALIA, AIMA and ACLIS.

The opportunities afforded by this type of continuing education activity have been tremendous. Often time they have been a 'point of need' in my career when I needed a new framework or, more colloquially, a new 'bag of tricks' on which to continue to make an effective contribution in my workplace.

Of course, as one moves upwards in the organisational structure, the challenges of the job itself can form part of one's training and development. Challenges provide learning opportunities. Similarly, participation in management retreats, planning activities and review processes have contributed hugely to the development of my skills as a manager.

In the course of my career I have been extensively involved in the selection of library staff at the professional entry level and middle management levels. Today selection criteria for many positions place equal, if not more, emphasis on generic skills such as communication, team work, project management as they do on the 'technical' skills of librarianship. New graduates seem quite able to discuss at interview the attributes of good management.

One can only speculate how much of their knowledge and ability is due to changed curriculum content and how much of it is due to what I must admit is a new generation of librarians. Their educational experiences seem much broader than my own were. Many students, even those having gone straight from school to university, have a variety of work experience which provides them with some framework for understanding theories and developing skills. The really clever students, the ones who in my experience get the jobs, are the ones who can argue skills against that variety of experience, or who can translate the attributes of good management into the practicality of the workplace, even in a hypothetical sense. ∎

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